DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 850 CS 214 997

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TITLE Talking with One's Self: Reproducing Collaborative Writing Strategies in a Composition Course for Adult, Independent, Distance Learners.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; Computer Mediated Communication; *Cooperative Learning; *Distance Education; Higher Education; Independent Study; Journal Writing; Learning Strategies; Nontraditional Education; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing; State University of New York Empire State Coll; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Various authorities outline the benefits of collaboration in the form of classroom writing groups in learning certain writing skills. Collaboration promotes interaction, dialogue and negotiation between reader and writer. Whether the collaboration resides in interior dialogue or communal discourse or both, collaborative discourse can enable the student to gather a more objective perspective on the meaning and structure of his/her writing. The question for State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning became, "How can collaborative learning strategies be implemented successfully in a guided independent study course in writing for adult students?" The answer involved three important strategies to help students at a distance develop the type of critical discourse that occurs through collaborative writing groups: (1) use of a structured learning journal (one in which students are given specific questions to lead them to an essay-form production); (2) a course structure with revision and repetition of the writing process in different contexts built in; and (3) clear criteria for evaluation. The structured learning journal reproduces all except one of these functions of collaborative writing; it reproduces the "directive" function least well. However, a series of learning journal questions that coordinate with required essays can help students generalize writing concepts and processes by offering them the chance to ask the same critical questions about different texts within different contexts. Ultimately, the use of such learning strategies can reproduce the effects of face-to-face discussion and enable the adult, independent, distance learner to function at the metacognitive level of a collaborative writing group. (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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Talking With One's Self: Reproducing Collaborative Writing Strategies in a Composition Course for Adult, Independent, Distance Learners

Collaboration as a stragegy for teaching about writing has had varied effects on the quality of student writing, depending upon the way the collaboration has been prepared for and implemented within the context of the writing class. Yet most writing instructors would agree that collaboration (most often student workshops and discussion groups to aid revision and, to a lesser extent, invention) can be a very effective way of teaching about the social nature of communication and the social construction of meaning, the need to write within the context of a purpose and an audience, and the need to regard writing as a process in which revision plays a major role.

Harris clearly outlines the benefits of collaboration, in the form of classroom writing groups, in learning certain writing skills. She states that collaboration "promote[s] interaction between reader and writer," "promote[s] dialogue and negotiation," "heighten[s] writers' sense of audience," and "move[s] the student from the traditional passive stance of receiving knowledge from an authority to an active involvement which makes talk integral to writing" (369). Harris reinforces this view as she reviews the literature, citing many researchers and instructors who link student collaboration with fuller and more analytical revision, less writing anxiety, better organization and language use, and better editing and proofreading skills (371-372). For many years, writing instructors have accepted the fact that collaboration, when it is planned for and implemented appropriately, can be a strong teaching

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and learning strategy for student writers.

What if those student writers are adults? One skill in particular--the critical discussion that collaboration assumes--is particularly important to the way in which adults construct knowledge. Learning theorists highlight the iterative process of adult learning, the need to deal with concepts *through discussion* in order to construct the knowledge that adds to the adult student's understanding of a certain field and of his/her own abilities within that field.

Jarvis and Garrison state that such dialogue is the key to learning. Jarvis feels that the learner must verify his or her understandings by testing those insights through dialogue with others (166). Garrison states that "meaning is ultimately the responsibility of each individual but knowledge is created in collaboration with others . . . . knowledge is gained through interacting with the external world through direct experience and critical dialogue; therefore this process must inherently be collaborative" (144).

Meizrow agrees that communicative learning in adults ("trying to understand what someone means") occurs through discourse, "that special kind of dialogue in which we focus on content and attempt to justify beliefs by giving and defending reasons and by examining evidence for and against competing viewpoints" (225). Discourse involves the give-and-take of critical, informed discussion. Yet discourse does not necessarily need to be conversation among people gathered in a room; discourse can occur as a series of "one-to-one encounters, including authors of published texts" (225). Reither

and Vipond reinforce the "person-text" definition of discourse as well. They state that collaboration may take different forms, one of which is "knowledge making," or reading and analyzing the works of others who have written about a particular field. That is, discourse can be an interior dialogue created as a result of critically interacting with and articulating one's thoughts about the written text.

No matter whether the collaboration resides in interior dialogue or communal discourse or both, collaborative discourse can enable the student of writing to gather a more objective perspective on the meaning and structure of his/her writing. But setting the scene for learning through collaboration--through the type of conversation which brings forth the learner's insights and tests those insights through critical, analytical discourse--is difficult enough in classroom teaching. Those who have tried to implement collaboration in the writing class attest to both successes (e.g., Reither and Vipond, Mitchell) and failures (e.g., Newkirk), at the same time at which they generally acknowledge the benefits that collaborative teaching and learning strategies can provide.

Given the importance of collaboration in the teaching of writing, and especially given the importance of critical discourse to adult learning, the question for SUNY Empire State College's Center for Distance Learning became, "How can collaborative learning strategies be implemented successfully in a guided independent study course in writing for adult students working at a distance?" That is, "What are the different ways in which a critical, analytical conversation about writing can be reproduced for adult, independent,

distance learners?"

Obviously, the type of collaboration to be created needed to be the type that Meizrow, Reither, and Vipond acknowledge--discourse between student and text--since most students work in a truly independent mode, without the computer access that would provide membership in a virtual, if not an actual, collaborative writing group. Students needed to be able to gain enough distance from their own writing in order to make the move, as Lotto calls it, from "utterance" to "text," from defining their writing as their own thoughts on the page to defining it more objectively as a text, a piece of public communication (687), in order to enable such discourse to occur.

Three important strategies were used to help students regard their writing more objectively and to reproduce, at a distance, the type of critical discourse that occurs through the collaborative writing group: 1) the use of a structured learning journal, 2) a course structure with revision and repetition of the writing process in different contexts built in, and 3) clear criteria for evaluation. The hope was that, by incorporating these strategies into the actual course structure and by reinforcing them through a particular type of student-instructor interaction, students would move toward creating an interior, critial dialogue about their own writing and gain the learning benefits of the collaborative group (i.e., less anxiety with the writing process, more audience awareness, more awareness of the need for revision, more aptitude in critical reading and revision).

A structured learning journal, coordinated especially with the

first formal essay assignment, was developed to elicit many different types of entries in addition to the personal, reflective "What have I learned?" or "What area did I need to focus on the most in revision?" type of questions. Certain questions were intended to aid invention, especially for those students who were uneasy with the concept of choosing their own topic for writing or uneasy with the concepts of freewriting or brainstorming (as are many adult students, who often want to "get to the point" and plunge into the actual writing more quickly). Invention questions consisted of such things as, "What are my interests?," "What do I know about this subject?," "Where did I get my knowledge?," "What else do I need to know if I want to write about the subject?," and "Where can I get that information?" Other questions were structured to reinforce movement through the writing process. Activities such as using a question and answer chain to narrow a topic or questions such as "What are the possible answers to the research question?" help the student work through the type of thinking that's needed at various points in order to develop the writing to the next "stage."

The fact that these questions were in a structured learning journal as opposed to being dealt with by freewriting, brainstorming, or general discussion and reading about the writing process helped many students feel comfortable about moving ahead with the writing task. The learning journal questions enabled them to do their own thinking but identified the type of thinking that would help them progress through identifying, evaluating, choosing an appropriate topic for writing, and considering how to develop that topic. The journal provides enough structure for adult

students to feel more confident about applying appropriate writing concepts at appropriate points in the writing process.

Students, by the way, *are not* "locked in" to answering the learning journal questions if they feel they do not need them to aid invention and development. Students can move directly into choosing a topic for writing, in consultation with the instructor, and/or adapt the journal to their individual writing needs.

Other types of learning journal questions involve describing and then moving from description into evaluation of the information. Some of these learning journal activities *are* required in order to help students move away from their writing as personal statement and start thinking about their writing as public text. Activities such as grouping and naming the categories of information the student is working with help the student describe his or her support and try to lead the student into critical discourse--into searching for evidence to judge the support's appropriateness in type and amount. Other series of questions lead more directly from description into evaluation: e.g., "What is the topic of your working thesis?," "What is the comment you've made about that topic?," "Does your thesis imply a 'why?,' "what?,' or 'how?' question?," "Does your supporting information actually answer the 'why?,' 'what?,' or 'how' in order to fulfill the expectations established for the reader?"

And still other questions ask the student directly to evaluate his/her work with the reading audience in mind: "Does the thesis sentence contain key words that identify the specific thought type [for the reader]?," or "What specific style will present the ideas and support [to the reader] in the best possible way?" Questions

such as these are intended to help students learn the need to move from self to subject as they develop the text through revision, making the text take on a separate identity from the writer, an identity as a public statement written for an audience.

Learning journal questions which ask students to describe and evaluate their writing reinforce students' learning about the need to revise as well. Description and evaluation questions are asked within the context of revising the draft, an activity which is identified and planned for as part of the course structure and timing. Learning journal questions highlight the need to go back and read the text critically, putting as much distance as possible between the writer and the draft, to ask what needs to be done in order to help another reader understand the text easily.

By focusing on invention and process (questions which can help lessen anxiety) and description and evaluation (questions which help reinforce the concept of audience and the importance of revision), the structured learning journal reproduces many of the functions of the collaborative writing group. In her literature review, Harris cites many examples of researchers and observers of writing groups (e.g., Gere and Stevens, Davis) who have found that, in addition to lessening writing anxiety and reinforcing the concept of audience, the collaborative writing group performs critical reading, descriptive/informative, questioning, directive, and evaluative functions (Harris, 375-377). That is, students in collaborative writing groups learn how to read a draft text more carefully, asking questions about the writing as and after they read. They describe what has taken place in the written text and in themselves as

readers in order to inform the writer that certain items are unclear, need fuller explanation, etc. They question the writer about purpose, intent, and meaning. And they direct the writer to specific places in the text and explain how to revise the content, structure, or language in order to make the text more understandable or effective.

The structured learning journal can reproduce all except one of these functions; it reproduces the "directive" function least well. Students often find it hardest to "fix" a problem once they have evaluated that something "isn't quite right" with the content, order, or language. Yet the directive function is, perhaps, the one function that is best lost, since it should be the purpose of the group to point out needs and offer *many* possible solutions rather than to "correct" the text. The other functions of the group *can* be internalized to create critical discourse between student and text. Students in the course have reported that, as one student put it, they "start to ask these [learning journal] questions in [their] mind[s] as [they] work on other papers."

But the critical reading/audience awareness/evaluation functions are not the only functions of the group. Group collaboration in the teaching of writing is important in showing that the same processes and questions apply to different writers, different contexts, and different drafts of particular texts. Ideally, collaborative discourse helps the student learn about such fundamental writing concepts as audience, organization, idea development, or tone in a general way as well as within a particular context. Students learn general concepts as they evaluate

particular texts, and the general concepts give them a common language for evaluating particular texts more fully and logically. The general and the particular exist in a symbiotic relationship within the context of critical discourse.

As Richard Coe states, a characteristic of good writers is that they "know how to apply general principles of composition to particular writing tasks and contexts" (412). Collaboration as a teaching and learning strategy can ultimately reinforce general over narrow, contextual, ways of knowing and thinking about writing, even though the discourse occurs within the context of the discussion of particular texts. The hope is that, through repeated discussion of particulars, the student will begin to generalize both the processes and characteristics of good writing.

A series of learning journal questions that coordinate with required essays can help students generalize writing concepts and processes simply by offering students the chance to ask the same critical questions about different texts within different contexts. Two additional strategies, repetitive course structure and the inclusion of clear criteria for evaluation, help the student generalize concepts at the same time at which the student is learning how to perceive personal utterance as a public text appropriate for critical interaction.

Kember, using the analogy of a zoom lens, explains that a useful course structure for any type of learning involves offering fundamental concepts more generally at first, without too much detail, and then progressively zooming into more detail as the students grasp basic ideas (295). He argues that loading a course

with too many details too soon results in surface as opposed to deep learning, since it tends to make students memorize information as opposed to giving them the time to construct personal and logical connections among important concepts (289-290). He agrees with other instructional designers who state that, for meaningful learning to occur, a course must first help "diagnose" and "reveal" "existing conceptual frameworks . . . to the student," then make the student "dissatisfied with existing conceptions," and finally "reconstruct" a "new conceptual framework" (299).

In other words, a course must start slowly and on a general level, provide time for the student to learn fundamental, key concepts, and then present those concepts in different contexts, so that the student can apply and/or understand them differently and thus learn how to generalize fundamental concepts from specific examples. A course structured in this way also helps students understand that knowledge is changeable, often socially-constructed, and usually contextually-based. A course structured to highlight both the course material and the basic way in which knowledge is constructed opens the way to the critical discourse that supports learning. A collaborative writing group, with its focus on fundamental writing concepts within different contexts, offers an appropriate vehicle to be used to help create the type of course structure that Kember supports.

How can this structure and its results be gained within the context of a guided independent study, distance learning course? The course structure itself must reproduce the iterative process of the group, offering the opportunity to do the same type of

questioning, describing, evaluating, etc. within different contexts. The distance course was structured to move students through the same stages of the same writing process (prewriting, gathering information, shaping information, revising) in different ways, using the learning journal each time so students could repeat the same types of questions in their critical dialogue with the text. Yet each progressive movement through the process added complexity in order to both deepen and broaden the students' understanding of the various stages.

For example, the first movement through the writing process (resulting in the first essay) relies more fully on using the learning journal questions for invention. The second and third movements through the writing process invite all and any free-writing, brainstorming, listing, and other invention techniques. The first movement through the writing process focuses more on developing a question and then answering the question in the form of a basic thesis statement (topic/angle). The second and third movements through the writing process delve into the various ways in which the thesis can be structured and language can be used to indicate to the reader the type of thought to expect.

The first movement through the writing process focuses on revising for full development and simple, logical structure of ideas. The second and third movements through the writing process deal with subtler and more complex organizational structures. The first movement through the writing process plans on time and requires the student to answer certain learning journal questions to aid description, evaluation, and revision. The second and third

movements through the writing process reinforce the need to revise and identify the same types of evaluation and revision questions, but in a less structured, more subtle way. The distance course was designed to teach a process that relies heavily on the crucial step of revising for an audience by asking students to move through the same writing and revising processes in different writing contexts and in increasingly complex ways.

Clear criteria for evaluating written drafts (in terms of unity, organization, support, language, and format) work hand in hand with a cyclical, repetitive course structure that incorporates structured learning journal questions, many of which are based upon those criteria. Criteria for evaluation, as students grow to understand them more fully, can offer the opportunity for changing the writer's perspective on the written draft--what Kember calls "dissatisfaction"--and help the writer move toward "reconstructing" his/her understanding of the qualities of good writing (the two movements which, according to Kember, contribute to deep as opposed to surface learning). Criteria for evaluation, when they offer writing concepts clearly, can bring student "discourse" and evaluation of the written text in sync with academic expectations for good writing, thus empowering students to join a specialized community of writers. As Garrison states, "a totally unstructured environment provides little information and feedback regarding learning activities and, consequently, a positive appraisal of conceptual development and knowledge validation is difficult. Students need to become critically aware of what they are being asked to learn" (143).

These three strategies--the use of a structured learning journal, a course structure that plans for revision time and repeats major concepts in an increasingly more complex way, and clear criteria for evaluation that are incorporated into selected learning journal entries--offer adult, independent study, distance students the opportunity to gain perspective on their written texts and participate in the critical discourse that aids learning, opportunities that are offered by the collaborative writing group in the on-site class. The strategies assume that the student is "involved" in his or her own learning (Grow 129), with the instructor functioning as a faciliator of learning and the learning itself focusing on both "subject matter" and such "empowerment skills" as "critical thinking," "problem-solving," "learning strategies," and "self-evaluation" (Grow 145) that are appropriate to the developmental stages of adults.

Of course, the learning may not be as varied or as rich or as objective as the learning gained through participation in an on-site group. Adult students working independently ultimately are limited to their own "conversations." But the strategies involved can help those adult students create those conversations and thus interact with the written text in a new, more objective and critical way. Ultimately, such strategies can foster and reproduce the effects of discussion and enable the adult, independent, distance learner to function at the metacognitive level that is the desired outcome of the collaborative writing group.

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